



BOOK REVIEW

Post-Protestantism: Contemporary Exclusions, Critical Theology and Reformation 500 in the Context of the Phenomenon of the “Emerging Church”

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*“How are you gonna be a revolutionary if you’re such a traditionalist?”
(La-La Land, 2016)*

In 2016, the compilers of the Oxford dictionary declared their Word of the Year to be “post-truth”. It will soon become known which term will become the marker of 2017. But this is not the main topic of the present discussion. I venture to suggest that one of the most important terms for thinking Protestants in the year in which 500 years of the Reformation is celebrated (or, rather, remembered) is the term “post-Protestantism” (Longbons, 2013). I am convinced that this word represents a watershed between the Protestantism that we already know – fundamentalist, conservative, denominational, modernist – and a Protestantism, which (at least in Ukraine) is only just emerging: post-fundamentalist, post-conservative, post-denominational and post-modernist.

Following the publication of first the Russian and then the Ukrainian version of the book entitled *The Emerging Church* by Roman Soloviy, Pentecostal author and Head of the Research Centre of the Euro-Asian Accrediting Association (EAAA) (Soloviy, 2014), a revised version of Soloviy’s argument is now presented under the updated title *The Phenomenon of the Emerging Church*¹ (Soloviy, 2017) (the book was published with the support of the EAAA Research Centre). As was the case two years ago, this work can today be considered one of the most important books not only in the Ukrainian (post-) Protestant theological environment, but also in the ecclesiastical sphere of the

¹ Soloviy, R. (2017). *Fenomen poiavliaiushcheisia tserkvi v kontekste teologicheskikh i ekklesiologicheskikh transformatsii v sovremennom zapadnom protestantizme* [The phenomenon of the emerging church in the context of the theological and ecclesiastical transformations in contemporary Western Protestantism]. Kiev: Dikh i Litera.

evangelical communities of the post-Soviet space. I am certain that the topics that achieve definition in this work will be the subject of many discussions at pastoral conferences and episcopal meetings, as well as in academic circles.

By “post-Protestantism,” I refer to the phenomenon of postmodern ecclesiology, about which Soloviy writes in detail. By its very existence, the phenomenon of the emerging church reminds us that Christianity has already crossed the boundary of Protestantism and passed into the era of post-Protestantism. Moreover, this comes at a time when Protestants of the post-Soviet space are, at best, standing still, and, at worst, looking back, hoping to tie in their current practice to the experience of the early Church. It turns out that if you cannot say anything new and when you cannot adapt your “own” faith to a changing world, then the outcome consists in the so-called turn *ad fontes* (“to the origins”). This is what is referred to in terms of a flight to the (abstract) ideal early Church and (fictitious) impeccable beliefs of the first Christians.

Instead of constantly looking back, one should look to the future, not for the purposes of establishing oneself in modernity, but instead with the goal of adapting oneself to current practice—or, what is more likely, also adapt oneself to the future—which our Protestants somehow cannot embrace. Today our notions are constructed around postmodern culture, not only in terms of the world around us, but also as concerns the Church. This thought is perhaps the most important one expressed in the book *The Phenomenon of the Emerging Church*. The author writes: “Postmodernism increasingly defines the cultural space of our time. How should evangelical theology take cognisance of this cultural situation?” (Soloviy 2017, p. 6) Soloviy, considering the worldview outlook, theological and ecclesiological features of the emerging church, indicates that one of its main advantages consists in its emphasis on the need to formulate new ways of expressing the Gospel in contemporary culture (Ibid., p. 315). The fact that the emerging church has an inherently dissenting character, directed against modernism and its influence on Christianity (Ibid., p. 317), points to its post-Protestant character.

It is widely believed that the decline of spirituality in society around the time of the Reformation, exacerbated by the toxic behaviour of the Church, resulted in the formation of a new principle, which we now refer to as the “Protestant principle”. This principle is enshrined in the constant need of the church to engage in self-reflection, to take a critical attitude towards its practice, and experience a constant thirst for reform. On the one hand, the reformers placed an emphasis on the personal choices of an individual person as opposed to the authority and tradition of the institution of the Church. On the other hand, we should not forget that Protestantism reached its apogee during the time of modernity, i.e. exactly the culmination of that against which the postmodern critique is directed. From a cultural point of view, then, the era of Protestantism represents a time of enlightenment, rationality and science. On the one hand, Protestantism—as, in principle, Western ideology *per se*—is fundamentally modern in the sense of its assertion of the primacy of human freedom over any tradition, church authority (or, for that matter, any other form of hierarchical authority). On the other

hand, the very strong emphasis on rationality became a kind of impetus for the birth of the so-called post-denominational “free” churches, which rejected the episcopal (like any other hierarchical) form of government, but at the same time as agreeing with the fundamental principles of Protestantism. It is with exactly such trends in modern ecclesiology that the author of *The Phenomenon of the Emerging Church* is concerned.

Post-Protestantism also characterises the emergence in the theological academic environment of the late 20th to early 21st centuries of such trends as post-liberalism, radical orthodoxy and ecumenism, which tried to take a more holistic, less individualistic, approach to seeing the Christian tradition as a whole. Here, the individualistic approach is presented as characterised by isolation and the creation of so-called theological and ecclesiological ghettos. Soloviy’s book, if read in the context of the Reformation commemoration, encourages the assumption that the biggest mistake of modern conservative Protestants (including post-Soviet) is nostalgia for the last “golden age” of biblical Christianity.

While Luther, Calvin and other reformers were known for their openness to the new, advocated dialogue with the modern world, accepted the challenges of the cultural paradigm of their time, and even in some areas were ahead of the curve, post-Soviet Protestants tend to dwell in the past, living off the legacy of Christians who suffered for their faith during the times of the USSR. When, in accepting the challenges of the present, contemporary Western Christianity is attempting to build a tolerable, future-oriented theology and ecclesiology, we are still bogged down with details concerning the Eucharist of the early church.

The well-known German-American theologian Paul Tillich once jotted down in his sermon *Forget and be Forgotten* the following thoughts: “Life could not continue without rejecting the past in the past”, “Life uses the past and past battles to simultaneously break through to one’s own renewal.” (Tillich, 2009) Existing nations, writes Tillich, were not able to discard anything from their heritage; thus, the path to progress was closed to them until the burden of the past broke down its present leading to their demise. Sometimes (even in the context of the Reformation commemoration) we need to ask ourselves: is not the Christian church also excessively burdened by its past and its failure to break down its present? (Ibid., p. 263).

In his book *The Next Reformation: Why Evangelicals Must Embrace Postmodernity*, the American professor of Religious Studies Karl Raschke sets out his ideas about the “next Reformation”, which, according to him, will by its nature have a post-denominational character. Raschke describes Luther as a man who was not of his time: he was neither a scholastic—that is to say, an academic theologian, wedded to Aristotelian philosophy—nor a humanist in love with Greek or Latin literature. His passion was the Bible, which he studied alongside the Church; the latter, however, though making a concerted attempt to make its message accessible to the contemporary world, was not as meticulous in its approach as Luther himself was. Raschke contends that, according to the standards of his time, Luther would be considered a postmodernist (Raschke, 2005). The Reformation

itself may be seen as a reaction against modernism in its medieval manifestation; the word “modern” comes from the Latin *moderna*, which means “only just” or “just now” (Ibid., p. 110). Reformation, in essence, was a 16th century version of deconstruction (Derrida’s terms).

Soloviy dedicated 300 pages of text to a discussion of post-conservative Christianity, which, according to him, is best reflected in the practices of the group referred to as the “emerging church”. This text informs us that the movement represents not so much a return to the authentic biblical and theological origins—or even to the Bible as a single guide to faith and practice—but rather consists in a redirection of our attention towards a less modernist (rationalist) approach, in keeping with the culture of postmodernity. In bypassing traditional evangelical theology, this approach offers an alternative, more sustainable post-conservative path.

The origins of the term “emerging church” are derived from the so-called *Emergent Village*, a group of churches that began to coalesce in the 1990s due to a general sense of disillusionment and disappointment in the regular church institutions of the late 20th century. The acknowledged father of the “emerging church” is the American pastor Brian McLaren, who, in his pastoral work, tried to reach out people who had no church affiliations (Ibid., p. 273). The titles of McLaren’s books refer to topics that are quintessentially representative of the “emerging church”: *The Church on the Other Side* (2009); *Everything Must Change* (2009); *a Generous Orthodoxy* (2009); *a New Kind of Christian* (2010); *The Last Word and the Word after That* (2013).

The New Testament is considered by representatives of the “leading churches” as a kind of visual aid for understanding how the early church was able to adapt and evolve in its contemporary world, taking rapid changes into its stride to boldly overcome arising challenges. The Holy Scripture represents the recorded Word of God, which tells how the ancient faith community reacted to situations on the basis of one life context or another. For McLaren, the Church is understood as “a society that shapes disciples who work for the liberation and healing of this world, based on a relationship with Jesus and the glad tidings of the Gospels.” (Smith, 2014) The new ecclesiology shows little interest in any the following traditional questions: the nature of the church, the foundations of the church, the church structure, or a different understanding of what the form of government of the church should be. The question of denominational membership is also something that is decidedly not on the agenda. All this is due to the fact that the social group behind what the “emerging church” is trying to achieve is essentially postmodern in its perceptions of the world. All these secondary themes are only of interest to the post-Soviet evangelical community to the extent that it continues to cling to modernist constructions and be guided by its existing precepts.

Although McLaren does not provide an evaluation of the phenomenon of the “emerging church”, the attentive reader may note that the representatives of this movement, like those during the Reformation, call for a new theology within the new church, thanks to which a new paradigm could be created by means of

which people who are not already interested in Christ would become interested and the good news about Jesus could be told to unbelievers in a new way. Given the theory and practice of the “emerging church”, it is reasonable to assume that in the 21st century it will be the modern mainstream Protestant church that will be identified as representative of the force against which Luther railed, and that the postmodern ecclesiology with its critical theology, which is expressed in a struggle against established concepts and practices, and, corresponding to the spirit of the Reformation, will act as the spiritual descendant of Luther. Notwithstanding the French philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard’s definition of postmodernism as a suspicion of metanarratives, the Reformation of the monk Luther can be considered as nothing more than a suspicion of the metanarrative of his own church. Like Luther, postmodernism challenges all “comprehensive” or “totalitarian” schemes for explaining reality or claims regarding the status of truth and authority. Such metanarratives include not only political and social ideas, but also religious worldviews, metaphysical philosophies and even complex scientific theories (Olson, 2007).

The question facing Protestants in the year of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation is rather striking: what are we protesting against today? For the inheritors of the Reformation, the Catholic Church and its practices are no longer the enemy. On the contrary, in some spheres of service, closer cooperation between the two branches of Christianity is increasingly taking place. Into which temple, then, should contemporary reformers enter; who needs to be thrown out of it; whose tables are to be turned over? When all is said and done, on which door is it necessary to nail the 95 theses of today’s world? Clearly, everyone must answer this question for him- or herself. However, I will assume the religious postmodernism, which we are only just starting to understand today, is precisely the embodiment of the spirit of the Reformation. Luther recalled that authentic theological thinking revolves around the cross, the Gospels and grace, not self-righteousness, metaphysical debates or the law.

The next Reformation, which I believe is already gradually taking place in the hearts and minds of the young generation of evangelical believers (at least, those not affected by fundamentalism), will occur: **(a)** in an atmosphere of radical humility before the Kierkegaardian “paradox,” **(b)** with a rejection of the propositional theory of truth, **(c)** in the absence of pride, not only in our lives, but also in our thoughts (Raschke, 2005). The pagans of the first century considered Christianity a manifestation of atheism, and that its argumentation was illogical and contradictory. The Roman authorities did not respect Christians. Today’s post-Protestantism is referred to in terms of liberalism and even as the first steps towards atheism. Ossified church structures may not respect it, often ridiculing it or considering it provocative and harmful. Nevertheless, post-Protestantism, in the form of an “emerging church”, constitutes the starting point of a new theology, which by its inherent nature will be both critical in its outlook and global in its aspect (Raschke, 2016).

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